

## 8. Errand in the Wilderness—Congregationalism in Appalachia

Appalachia is an overlooked region of the United States, put bluntly. No one considers it even remotely glamorous, with its multitude of social and economic problems deriving from isolation and resource exploitation. It has often been compared to the overseas “Third World” countless times as a result, and is further impenetrable to outsiders due to the persistence of some traditional folkways and customs. Such a subject is not easily treated in a short essay as this.

But it was also the setting for several noble, if faintly paternalistic, attempts to uplift the standard of teaching and preaching in the region through the same body that had valiantly worked for years several hundred miles to the south, the American Missionary Association. Its ministers and schoolteachers established a fairly wide network of schools and churches in the outposts of the highlands and mountain country of Kentucky and Tennessee. Although only two of those churches survive as full members of the United Church of Christ in the Southeast Conference today, the Appalachian or “mountain White” tradition is worth mentioning as an example of one strand of the SEC’s tapestry of institutions and voices.

According to a 2010 history of Community Church in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, it was a Massachusetts-born settler’s desire for a thorough education for her and others’ children that brought, first a female teacher, and later a Maine pastor to the wilds of Cumberland County, on a plateau situated about 2,000 feet above sea level. The pastor, “Father” Benjamin Dodge (1818-1897), began work on what would become Pleasant Hill Academy and Community Church. A later headmaster and his physician wife—a novelty for that day—built upon that foundation, with the work of Dr. May Cravath Wharton (1873-1959), chronicled in the book *Doctor Woman of the Cumberlands*, materializing itself in drastically improved medical care to the residents of the area. Eventually this led to the founding of a sanatorium in 1922, which took the name “Uplands” from a poem written by May Wharton’s cousin. In later decades, the hospital would move to the county seat of Crossville, and the area would gradually evolve into a center of retirement for missionaries and (mostly) Congregational Christian pastors from other states, with the heritage carefully preserved along with an increasing number of amenities to meet the needs of the new residents. The Academy eventually closed when public education became available in that area in the 1940s, analogous to what had happened to the AMA schools serving Blacks.<sup>1</sup>

At the First Congregational Church of Crossville, Tennessee (AUTHOR'S NOTE: the church is no longer part of the UCC), the long tenure of Abram Nightingale (1888-1975) as pastor from 1924 to 1956 was marked by an intense period of service to church and community. From a 1929 article in *The American Missionary*:

A fine young citizen of the community died of typhoid fever. The minister was called upon to preach his funeral sermon.

"It was not God's will that he should die," he told his hearers, "but your own will. The disease that killed him is one that has no place in any intelligent community. It can be controlled, and it is your job and mine to control it. It is our own work that this fine young friend lies dead among us, for our carelessness has killed him."

... Between the epidemic and the minister, people began to think about it pretty seriously. The upshot of it was that by one way and another, through the co-operation of physicians and the persuasion of those who were beginning to think of health in community terms, 1,000 inoculations against typhoid were given last year. As a result there were not more than a dozen cases in the county, and only one death.

A cursory examination of school children in the county showed that from 60 to 70 per cent of them were physically defective. There were thousands of cases of undernourishment, bad teeth and eyes, hookworm and other ailments. There were also found many children attending school with active cases of tuberculosis.

Mass meetings were held, teachers and parents were interested, civic clubs were enrolled in the campaign, and when the county court next met, the town and its neighboring communities moved in on them. With banners flying and spokesmen [*sic*] ready, they packed the courthouse, and there they stayed until they had secured an appropriation as a beginning for an efficient health unit. Ways also were found to utilize a Red Cross fund left over from war work, and the campaign was begun.

Already—that was only a year ago—four weeks of tuberculosis chest clinics have been held throughout the county, a day in a place; and hundreds of tests have been given and treatments recommended. Baby clinics have been held, with the enthusiastic co-operation of a trained nurse in a well-equipped mountain school not far away. People are beginning to think that a full-time health unit is even more of a necessity than a sheriff. Already a sanitation office is stationed in the county, and the clean-up which must precede any practical health campaign is well under way.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another congregation, in a coal-mining village named Evarts, Kentucky, carried out an integrated Vacation Bible School with a Black Baptist church in the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Some of the other churches in this group, however, were actually established by Northern settlers, as the Congregational Church of Deer Lodge, Tennessee and the Barton Chapel Congregational Church at Robbins, Tennessee were. Whatever their origins, the churches were very much of a piece with the “pure” churches that the AMA sought to build for Blacks in that they stressed uplift over the otherworldliness associated with “mountain religion” in most other places. Of course, pastors frequently played the role of the schoolteacher for a particular community for the first few generations.

As with the AMA’s mission among Blacks, the movement declined during the 20th century, due to the growth of public education and the growing popularity of Baptist, Holiness, and Pentecostal faiths. Economic decline due to abandonment of coal mines and lumber camps and environmental devastation due to practices such as stripping lands for coal and timber also had negative impacts on the communities where those churches were located, making them unfeasible for future development. The Deer Lodge, Tennessee church survived, for example, by sharing a ministry with two nearby Presbyterian congregations from the 1970s through the 2000s. By contrast, Evarts, Kentucky’s congregation transferred to the United Methodist Church for purposes of fellowship and a stable, regular ministry in 1978. A few others withdrew in reaction to the UCC’s espousal of liberal political stands, most notably the Crossville, Tennessee church mentioned above, back in 1982. But the mission to the mountains was by no means a failure, as it permitted a word of hope to be spoken to one of America’s most despairing regions.

## **NOTES**

1. Ted Braun, *Mission Without Boundaries: The Remarkable Story of the Pleasant Hill Community Church, Pleasant Hill, Tennessee: 1885-2010*.
2. Katharine Atherton Grimes, “A Rural Preacher with a New Message,” *The American Missionary*, September 5, 1929, 310.
3. Carolyn P. Welch, “We Integrated Our Vacation Church School,” *United Church Herald*, May 16, 1963, 19, 34.